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Men/Boys Behaving Differently:
Contemporary Representations of Masculinity in Books for Young People

Kerry Mallan

The discourse of crisis

'Crisis' has been the password of recent writings about boys, masculinity and manhood from popular journalism to academic press. In all of these often disparate accounts there is the attempt on the part of the writers to find an anchorage in the storm, to utter a temporary 'truth' on the current state of affairs. In a similar way, the cause for the so-called 'crisis in masculinity' is just as diverse. Changing employment patterns, new labour technologies, feminist and gay politics, changing family configurations, and economic restructuring are but some of the factors which have contributed to the disruption to conventional certainties of masculinity (and femininity). As Gilbert and Gilbert note, 'An important feature of much of the crisis rhetoric is the idea that there is a central essence to being male, and that modern men, for a variety of reasons, depending on who is putting the argument, have lost it' (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998, p.30). The apparent security that comes with the notion of 'a central essence to being male' has been eroded and masculinity can no longer be fictionalised as a stable, coherent and universal attribute of men. Rather, masculinity is being re-defined (however provisionally) not as a 'singular', 'given' or 'natural' attribute of men, but as a social and political construction that is temporally and historically shaped (Kenway 1995; Connell 1995). Furthermore, because of the diversity of these historical, social and institutional processes and structures with their accompanying discourses on masculinity, it is more useful and accurate to acknowledge a plurality of masculinities (Connell 1995). Consequently, masculinity has become a contested site revealing both the diversity and differences within its construction and the gendered nature of relations between men, and between men and women.

With this brief outline of the discourse of 'crisis in masculinity' in mind, this paper will

consider what contemporary writing for young people can offer in terms of the current issues impacting on masculinity. In particular, specific questions will emerge as part of the discussion: How are writers for young people contributing to critiques of masculinity (and gender generally) through strategies of parody, self-reflexivity, and subversion? In reading these fictional accounts, does a more serious account of current anxieties lie beneath their playful surfaces? How might students benefit from an engagement with these and other texts in terms of their developing understandings of gender in general and masculine subjectivities in particular?

This paper does not present a comprehensive picture of the changing representations of masculinity available for young people at this present time. Rather, a selection of texts from picture books to novels for older readers is discussed as convenient indicators of the changing representations of masculinity that are evident in children's literature. These examples also highlight different constructions of masculinity (termed herein as 'antiheroic', 'transgressive', and 'hybird') which resist a 'hegemonic' model of virile, active and competitive masculinity (Connell 1995). Yet, the discussion cautions that simply turning the tables on conventional modes of representation in fiction does not mean that gender relations in real life are transformed. Therefore, in considering the textual representations of masculinity in the selected examples, I am mindful of the fact that fiction can never hope to capture 'reality' though it may be informed by a range of social and authorial values, events, and ideologies. As Curti notes, 'Fiction flows between life and imagination' (1998, p.viii). Consequently, texts may well reflect social realities to some extent, but more importantly they function as sites for the imaginative exploration of possibilities other than those currently available to the child or adolescent reader. It is in the ambivalence that surrounds textual representations that children's literature becomes a significant site for the problematisation of masculinity and the expression of gender performance, anxieties, and playfulness.

What price the (anti)hero?

Contemporary popular cultural texts such as film, video and books provide the contexts in which both traditional and new forms of masculine identity are played out. The traditional

male hero is defined in terms of his morality, strength and shrewdness. Whilst a considerable number of contemporary male heroes in literature and film may also exhibit these characteristics, others embody different characteristics which are more in line with the image of the 'new man' - a softer, more sensitive and caring individual. The emergence of the female action hero (for example, Lara Croft, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Zena: the Warrior Queen, and various heroic female characters in fiction) are visible characterisations which signal and form part of the generic shift away from the action-packed, he-man, heroic tale. However, such transformations have not completely erased the out-moded heroic ideal. Portrayals of the traditional hero continue to offer a nostalgic celebration of a conventional type of heroic masculine figure with its emphasis on individuality, and at times, alienation from the social group (Lucas 1998). These conventional heroic types are paradoxes as they appear to celebrate white, male dominance, superiority and power, while at the same time convey what Lucas (1998, p. 143) terms 'the unsustainable cost of such a masculine figure'. These 'unsustainable costs' can be seen in the following examples which for the most part illustrate how any idealised form of masculinity involves a high degree of personal alienation, struggle, physical proving, and emotional upheaval.

Cormier's *Heroes* (1998) is a rite-of-passage fiction of the kind which has dominated much of the adolescent literature in Australia and other western countries for decades. Such texts tend to show masculinity or male identity as a goal that is achieved by the individual male through what is essentially a process of heroic individualism. Paradoxically, however, this individualism is reflective of the character's sameness to other men. In other words, individualism in terms of the introspective, reserved, observant male protagonist can function independently as long as the masculine subject remains essentially one of the boys and his sexuality or ethnicity is not an issue. Individualism, therefore, operates within strict parameters.

Heroes questions the notion of heroic masculinity and its attendant rewards by contrasting the images of two returned servicemen to their hometown. The older and more celebrated 'hero' is Larry LaSalle. Larry was destined for greatness in the eyes of the townsfolk. He had the looks and charisma that were deemed necessary ingredients for a heroic masculine subject. On Larry's initial return home, he is given a hero's welcome. His medals and ribbons

are the visible signs of his heroism. The phallic materiality of Larry's body if further encoded in the way he is dressed and paraded before the awaiting crowd of admirers. Cormier draws on familiar Hollywood imagery to paint the image of the heroic marine:

> ...Larry LaSalle stood on the platform, resplendent in the green uniform with the lieutenant's bars on his shoulders and the ribbons and medals on his chest. He smiled, the old movie-star smile, skin tanned and glowing, small wrinkles around his eyes as he squinted down at us (p.62).

By way of stark contrast, the other 'hero' is a younger male, Francis Cassavant. Francis returns home as a grotesque, his face severely disfigured after an encounter with a grenade. In order to ensure anonymity, the war-time 'hero' is forced to disguise his disfigured appearance with bandages, scarves and a cap. Cormier paints a vivid description of the grotesque:

> Oh, I have eyes because I can see and ear-drums because I can hear but no ears to speak of, just bits of dangling flesh... my nostrils are like two small caves and they sometimes get blocked and I have to breathe through my mouth...My teeth are gone but my jaw is intact and my gums are firm so it's possible for me to wear dentures (p.1).

Ironically, Francis has been awarded the Silver Star for bravery in recognition of his heroic deed of falling on a grenade and saving the lives of other soldiers. The truth is that Francis wanted to die and saw the grenade as his exit point. Unlike Larry, whose return home is celebrated by the townsfolk, Francis tries to keep his true identity and 'heroic' past a secret. Further, his disfigured appearance runs counter to the image of the returned (intact) soldier and disrupts the celebratory image of victory by visually encoding the horror and violence of war. Such an unpalatable truth destroys the appeal of the heroic myth.

Francis also harbours a deep desire for revenge as Larry had raped his friend Natalie: an act he witnessed before he joined the armed forces and one which remained a dark secret that gnawed at his sense of justice and retribution. Rather than publicly debunk the myth of Larry

the local hero, Francis decides that he should take action into his own hands and kill Larry himself. In the tradition of the Western gunfighter, Francis walks through the early morning streets with his gun at his side and an avenging heart. However, Francis is denied retribution as Larry, now wracked with pain by legs that no longer function properly, kills himself.

While *Heroes* attempts to revise the heroic narrative by its questioning of the hero as the pinnacle of masculine proving and individualism, it still relies on violence as the ultimate solution. Such contradiction and ambivalence can also be seen in the character of Francis. Initially, he hero-worships Larry as the older and more experienced male. Even when he witnesses Larry's rape of Natalie, he does not destroy the homosocial bonds of mateship by telling the authorities of this crime. Instead, he takes flight and joins the army (and the company of other men) as a way of escaping his moral responsibility.

Cormier plays with the idea of surface appearances and the seduction of the image in creating heroes in the minds of people. His novel attempts to expose the 'unsustainable costs' of an heroic masculinity and provides a useful starting point for reconsidering popular representations of heroes.

War has been and continues to be an ideal *mise en scène* for the staging of masculinity. Traditionally, the warring male body signifies the masculine ideal of control, dominance and mastery, and in the case of *Heroes*, battle becomes the ultimate test of manhood, summarily sorting out the cowardly from the heroic. *Seeing Red* (Garland & Ross 1996) is a picture book which gently informs young readers of the part women have played in times of war while, at the same time, it highlights the ridiculousness of the military masquerade and masculine obsession with weaponry. Set in the time of the Napoleonic wars, the story tells of how a group of women from an English village fool the advancing French army led by 'Old Boney' by flashing their red petticoats to create the illusion that the redcoats were waiting in ambush. The men of the village in their eagerness for combat had headed off in the wrong direction. The visual depiction of the French army is one of chaos and incompetence as the bumbling troops fall over one another and struggle to control their wayward rifles. Furthermore, the soldiers' lanky, underdeveloped bodies with liquorice-thin legs knotted in various ways work against the heroic ideal and offer a parodic masculine display. Through its

burlesque of a familiar battle drama, *Seeing Red* manages to subvert the seriousness of war and the image of the military as a powerful force that engenders public adulation as witnessed in Cormier's *Heroes*.

Transgressive masculinity

In looking at conventional notions of heroic masculinity, other constructions of masculinity are called into question. As I've already suggested, the heroic/action tale is undergoing a transformation. In the case of *Seeing Red*, humour is employed to parody heroic masculinity. Inevitably, such an inversion of the heroic entails setting up an opposition between men and women, and between conventional notions of masculinity and femininity. One form of visual humour comes about by showing how the female body is unruly and in need of constraining. The female body is portrayed as unstable, unruly, and unnatural, while the male body is its opposite - stable, ordered, and natural (Waldby 1995). Transgressive masculinity plays with both gender and sexual norms and performances.

When we witness a male character transforming himself into his female 'other' the visual imaging of such transformations becomes a source of humour. This form of visual humour has been particularly effective in hitting its mark in films such as *Mrs Doubtfire* and *Birdcage* and perhaps less memorably in books such as *Famous for Five Minutes* (Clark 1992). In Clark's book, Peter finds a creative solution to his school's equal opportunity policy that insists that his all-boy rock group includes a female player. Peter decides to pretend to be his female, guitar-playing cousin Peta and so begins his life as a girl for three weeks. In his attempts to become Peta, Peter needs to transform the outward appearance of his body by putting on a dress, bra, blonde wig, stockings and shoes. Like the cross-dressing characters in the aforementioned films, Peter also has to 'discipline' his body to perform like a woman, and his 'femaleness' is established metonymically through his wig, clothes, voice and movements. These instances of male to female transformation offer readers/viewers voyeuristic moments of carnivalesque humour where there is an inversion of 'normality'. The notion of carnivalesque is derived from Mikail Bakhtin's (1968) discussion of the carnival of the Middle Ages and is characterised by taboo breaking and inversion of what is normal. The cross-dresser, therefore, participates in a form of burlesque, parodying the awkwardness of

the male body inhabiting a female persona. As Flanagan (1999, p. 6) notes, it is not so much a matter of whether a cross-dressed character can pass in visual terms for the gendered other but that 'they can *behave* like a man or woman, successfully performing that which has previously been denied to them'. Butler's (1990) notion of gender as a form of impersonation or performance is useful in understanding the ways in which transgressive masculinity in the form of a cross-dressing male subject often relies on stock stereotypes and humour in order to achieve its purpose. Furthermore, Peter's transgression is for a specific purpose and is bound by a strict time frame. To make the change permanent would complicate the male-female boundaries by challenging the ways in which being male and being female are naturalised in western societies.

A similar carnivalesque treatment is offered in *Prince Cinders* (Cole 1987). After years of domestic labour and marginalisation, the male Cinderella character is rewarded when he marries the spirited Princess and his mean step brothers are destined to a life of household duties as domestic fairies. The final illustration reveals the 'blokey', hairy brothers dressed in diaphanous dresses, fairy wings, and wielding feather dusters. While Prince Cinders remains visibly a male, his circumstances, attitudes and behaviour before meeting his Princess invert traditional male/female schemata. Such an inversion serves to unsettle conventional expectations and offer opportunities for an interrogation of gender roles and traits. In doing so, the limitations of a binary system of gendered identity are brought into question. However, in making her point, Cole runs the risk of diminishing the feminine and reasserting the polarised system of gender. This occurs in the way that in her search for the man of her dreams, Princess Lovelypenny declares that 'she will marry whoever fits the trousers lost by the prince who saved her from being eaten by the Big Hairy Monkey'. The joke is on her as she fails to recognise that her 'saviour' is the one whom she will ultimately save from a tormented life with other big hairy 'monkeys'. Furthermore, by replacing the erotic fetish of the shoe, as in the traditional version, with an item of masculine accoutrement and icon of masculine 'superiority', it is quite clear that the Prince Cinders not only wears the pants in the palace, but enjoys the benefits of a luxurious and pampered lifestyle from his adoring 'wife'. As Stephens (1992, p.140) notes:

> That abjection, humility and passivity now become deficiencies poses the question of

> why they should be virtues for the female; what constitutes desirable traits in a male in such a situation likewise reminds us that what is socially desirable and socially undesirable are cultural and linguistic constructs.

As part of their carnivalesque treatment, these books and films make effective use of the grotesque in the way they highlight the grotesqueness of the notion of 'male femininity'. Men behaving badly is one thing, but men behaving as women is quite another form of grossness which disrupts the conventional notion that gender is symmetrical (male/female) and destabilises culturally constructed and sanctioned notions of maleness and femaleness. In a similar vein, the emasculation of the male through his domestication or feminisation is another means by which the opposition between men and women is portrayed; it also creates a divide between 'real' men and 'not-real' men (for example, the man who decides to take domestic responsibilities seriously may be considered as not being a real bloke but a 'wuss'). As McMahon's (1998) research into Australian domestic practices has revealed, the 'New Man' rhetoric is often at odds with reality.

Rutherford (in Edley & Wetherell, 1997, p. 204) contends that 'the context in which traditional forms of masculine identity made sense is rapidly disappearing'. As mentioned previously, 'the changing context' is largely a result of changing socio-economic practices associated with work and family and the impact of feminist and gay movements on gender relations and sexuality. Sexuality has become openly one of the most contested areas in discussing gender. While young adult fiction, generally, is still feeling its way in this field, heterosexuality remains the norm. Gay, lesbian and bi-forms of sexuality are still sensitive issues and are likely to be ones which cause considerable concern with the literary 'gatekeepers'. Transgressive sexuality opens up another part of the debate regarding masculine identity.

Postcards from no man's land (Chambers 1999), winner of the Carnegie Medal, has not escaped criticism for its subject matter despite winning this prestigious British award for children's literature. This book is about sexuality and desire. The story is told from the point of view of two central characters: Jacob a young man on his first visit to the Netherlands to visit the grave of his grandfather (also called Jacob) who died in World War II and Geertrui

an old woman who was Jacob's war-time lover. While Geertrui's romance with Jacob epitomises the passion of a heterosexual affair at a time of rigid morality and social unheaval, the characters young Jacob encounters enact other forms of sexuality in a contemporary society with its veneer of liberalism. On his first day in Amsterdam, young Jacob encounters a transvestite named Ton. While Jacob is sexually aroused by Ton he, nevertheless, senses 'something puzzling about her' (p. 7). The puzzle is soon solved when Ton kisses Jacob while at the same time 'pressing his hand deep in to her crotch, where he felt the swell of a compact set of penis and balls' (p.11). When Jacob meets Ton's (male) lover Daan he encounters another form of sexuality. Daan has two lovers - one male and one female. Daan is at ease with his own crossing of sexual boundaries and taboos. For Jacob's part, he is uncertain about his own sexuality. He finds himself attracted to Daan and Ton yet he is also sexually attracted to Hille, a young woman he meets during his visit to his grandfather's grave as part of the commemoration of the Battle of Arnhem. There is also a phantom lover lurking in his thoughts - Anne Frank. Jacob realises his obsession is based on a girl who exists only through the words of her diary. Despite the seemingly liberal face of Dutch society to accept difference, Ton reveals to Jacob the personal traumas he has experienced with his father's refusal to see him and accept his homosexuality and transvestism: 'he has never forgiven himself for breeding a queer' (p. 265). While Ton's story is not quite a cautionary tale for Jacob, it does provide a view about sexual preference/desire and the consequences that may occur when one goes against conventional notions of heterosexuality and masculinity.

One of the features which characterises conventional masculinity is the need among men to be recognised and accepted as men (Buchbinder 1998). Whilst some men as witnessed in the characters Ton and Daan in *Postcards from no man's land* are able to come out and face the consequences of their actions, others are unable to cope with the bullying, teasing and male-bonding rituals which are part of the hegemonic model.

Tyro (McRobbie 1999), set in a Scottish shipyard in the 1950s, warns of the cost of transgression in its highlighting of the pressures on men to conform to the ideals of a dominant form of masculinity with its sets of prescriptions and proscriptions. Part of the initiation into shipyard masculinity represented in this book is the stripping of the young

apprentice and the greasing of his genitals. This act is seen by the perpetrators as a leveller for ensuring conformity and retaining power relations within a masculine hierarchy. While Andrew is initially humiliated after his greasing, he learns any whistleblowing is useless as the act is regarded, even by the police, as a bit of fun. Consequently, he resigns to take it on the chin in true manly style rather than react against it. As a fellow worker, Jimmy, tells him: 'In a place like this.... difference is a killer. If you don't talk like them, think like them, you're already branded. Or suspected' (p. 110). A significant part of the suspicion that comes with any perception of difference is homosexuality. When another apprentice, Oliver, is subjected to the greasing ritual he is unable to cope and refuses to return to the shipyard and forfeits his dream of becoming a shipwright. In Oliver's case, his embarrassment is exacerbated by the fact that his secret of having a small penis has been revealed. One of the myths of dominant masculinity is the power invested in the penis (or its symbolic phallus) as the mark of 'true' heterosexual performance and prowess (Waldby 1995).

Hybrid masculinity: crossing the boundaries?

While transgressive masculinity suggests a sense of danger and risk in traversing gender/sexual boundaries and breaking with sexual taboos, a hybrid masculinity minimises the risk to some extent by opening out ways for merging constructions of both femininity and masculinity. In a lighter vein, the picture book, *Crusher is Coming* (Graham 1987), shows the kind of hybrid masculinity that combines traditional feminine and masculine traits. When Peter invites the school football hero home to play after school, he is quick to remove all signs of non-masculine accoutrements (such as his teddy bear) from his bedroom and cautions his mother not to kiss him in front of his potential friend. The ironic humour of the book resides in the inversion of the dominant masculine paradigm by showing Crusher playing dolls with Peter's young sister and eating fairy cakes. However, Bob Graham's decision to name his character 'Crusher' and to illustrate him with a bruised and battered football player's body leaves no doubt that Crusher is a real heterosexual bloke in the making despite his delighting in seemingly feminine activities. It appears that while appearances may be deceiving, they, nevertheless, provide a means for either a smooth or a rough passage from the familiar to the strange. If Crusher had a more feminised name and was a ballet dancer he probably wouldn't have been invited home for a play in the first place; nor would the book

have been such a runaway success.

Tohby Riddle's picture book, *The Singing Hat* (2000), is another example of hybrid masculinity. When office worker Colin Jenkins enjoys a long lunchtime sleep under a tree in a city park, he discovers on waking that a bird has made a nest on his head. This situation presents him with a conundrum: 'He could not easily dislodge the perfectly fitted nest from his head, nor did he want to interrupt the bird at such a fragile and important time of life'. With the encouragement of his young daughter, Colin decides to leave the nest where it is and to endure the consequences. The nest with its bird and later hatched offspring mark a life change for Colin. Yet despite losing his job and his home, Colin continues to offer a safe and stable abode for his feathered tenants. His nurturing side continues after the birds fly away and make a new home. Furthermore, to highlight the value of kindness and a nurturing attitude Colin is rewarded with 'the most beautiful and improbable things ... in the nest he had placed on the table by the window in his room'.

Riddle presents the Jenkins's household as one which comprises father and daughter, and so presumably within the narrative frame (and before the arrival of the bird and its nest) masculine subjectivity is already constructed as emotional and nurturing. This location of the male subject in the domestic setting disrupts dominant constructions of the public sphere as the site of male proving and of the home as a site of emasculation. In fact, Colin rejects (and is rejected by) the public sphere in his determination to nurture the bird and its hatchling. While Colin becomes estranged from the world of work, his subjectivity is formed through the inter-connectedness between him and those for whom he has responsibility - birds and daughter. However, in developing a male character who is deliberately 'feminised', the masculine subject becomes marginalised and disempowered within the dominant culture. This point is visually represented as a bowed Colin with birds and daughter in tow, heads forlornly away from his familiar surroundings towards an unknown destiny. The forbidding silhouette backdrop of the cityscape and the look of fear on the daughter's face as she tentatively holds onto her father's crumpled coat evoke an image which is far from victorious. However, this state of marginalisation is temporary, as Colin decides 'to take action' and return to the city and make his way on his terms.

As readers we can accept hybridity, but our existing stereotypes need to be turned upside down before we can accept its proposition. Crusher represents for young readers the embodiment of the SNAG who has all the right ingredients to be accepted as a man's man and a woman's man - big, tough, bulky, sensitive, caring, and well mannered, while leaving no doubt to his heterosexuality. On the other hand, Colin Jenkins's SNAG qualities position him as an outsider, and those feminine qualities valorised in him cannot flourish in the alien and at times hostile environment of the dominant culture. Whilst 'femininity' can be easily mimicked (as demonstrated by the earlier example of the cross-dresser, Peter, in *Famous for Five Minutes*) and pried apart from femaleness, it appears that it is not so easy to pry apart masculinity and maleness. If hybrid masculinity can be considered as a viable alternative to hegemonic masculinity, then *Crusher* and *The Singing Hat* invite imaginative considerations of such a possibility by engaging with notions of marginalisation, acceptance, individualism, and empowerment.

Whilst this discussion has considered alternative ways of reading masculine representations and performances in literature (such as, anti-heroic, transgressive, and hybrid masculinities) it too has succumbed to the almost deterministic fate of identification through categorisation. Categories are perpetually suspect, as Butler (1990) argues. Nevertheless, they have historically created spaces for enactments of various forms of gendered and sexual behaviours and identifications and alternatives to the homo-hetero, male-female binaries. In this sense, categories such as drag queen/king, butch, tomboys, transsexuals, and so on, have a site of identification rather than exist in an uninhabitable place in the social landscape. Whilst hybrid masculinity suggests, in one sense, a liberal solution by offering the best of both worlds, 'hybridity' is a term which postcolonial theorists have considered as having value in explaining the *inter*dependence and mutual constructions of subjectivities which have the potential to overcome the *exoticism* of cultural diversity (see Bhabha 1994). To fully realise the potential that Bhabha considers in terms of a hybrid masculinity, requires not only imagination, but a reconsideration of gender as it is currently viewed in social and legal terms.

Reading the masculine

Teachers have the potential to play a key role in the promotion of literature with all students. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) in *Masculinity goes to school* make an important point regarding boys and reading literature:

> Of all the subject domains at school, English has most opportunity to engage students with issues of masculinity and power, and to provide them with opportunities to critique, to interrogate and to subvert texts (p. 202).

Following the line of argument offered by Gilbert and Gilbert, teachers have some choices available to them. They can take the line of weak resistance and offer boys a limited repertoire of texts made available through male youth cultures with their restricted range of ways of being male. They can go along with what we think boys will read and give them stories made popular through electronic game culture, violent film genres, and sport journalism. On the other hand, they could decide that both boys and girls need opportunities to explore different texts and different approaches to using texts in the classroom which will be beneficial to both boys and girls and help them to develop positive understandings of themselves as gendered subjects and to broaden their experiences of social life (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, pp. 218-221).

As this discussion has suggested there are various texts written for young people which attempt to explore a range of masculinities and thereby offer a means for opening up discussion about gender and socially constructed ways of being male (and being female) in contemporary western societies. These texts, however, are access points to broader discussions and reconsiderations of the social, personal, legal and political protocols, strictures, and expectations of gender identification and sexuality. Teachers wishing to explore these issues with students need to consider imaginative and perhaps alternative approaches to using texts in the English curriculum. Consideration to this issue has been given by a number of writers in recent years drawing on work by feminists, other critical theorists, and practitioners in developing strategies for reading texts in order to foreground and identify assumptions about gender and gender relations, and thus challenge the naturalisation of gender polarities (see for example, Martino & Cook, 1998; Alloway & Gilbert 1997).

With the increasing de-emphasis on the place of literature in curriculum documents there is an even more pressing need for teachers to reassert their convictions about the potential literature can offer young people in assisting them to develop their understandings of self and others in a world increasingly characterised by uncertainty, flux and fluidity. Keeping in mind the point that fictional representations of masculinity may not necessarily equate with the lives of its readers, questions of representation are important in any social and textual analysis. Through critical reassessment of masculinity in different discursive practices and across a variety of texts (such as those discussed here), the ‘crisis’ rhetoric mentioned at the beginning of this paper can be approached in a way that is devoid of sentimentality and sensationalism. Such critical approaches and reappraisals may play a part in helping boys live their lives with a confidence for enacting different and positive ways of being.

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